SPENCE LIBRARY
Union Theological Seminary
RICHMOND, VA.

THE THEATRE

BY THE

REV. W. P. BREED, D.D.

IBR

SH
10
Zp
Box 2
no. 7

THE LIBRARY
Union Theological Seminary
RICHMOND, VA.

PRESBYTERIAN BOARD OF PUBLICATION,
No. 821 CHESTNUT STREET,
PHILADELPHIA.

THE

THEATRE.

BY THE

REV. W. P. BREED, D.D.

PHILADELPHIA:
PRESBYTERIAN BOARD OF PUBLICATION,
No. 821 CHESTNUT STREET.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1868, by

THE TRUSTEES OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN BOARD OF PUBLICATION,

In the Clerk's Office of the District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania.

WESTCOTT & THOMSON,
Stereotypers, Philada.

THE THEATRE.

THAT the subject of theatrical exhibitions is one of no inconsiderable importance is obvious from the fact of their extreme expensiveness—the gross receipts of the New York theatres during the year 1867 amounting to considerably over three millions of dollars; from the fact that hundreds and thousands of men and women, younger and older, devote their talents and their lives to the service of the stage; and from the fact that hundreds of thousands spend so large a proportion of their precious time in feeding their minds and hearts with the viands served up to them on the stage.

For it is impossible in the nature of things that the scenes exhibited there should not exert a powerful moral influence, good or bad, upon both actors and spectators. And if this influence be healthful and happy; if it kindle and feed the flame of virtue; if it help to build up to a high, pure manhood and womanhood, and thus fit for the duties and trials of life,—then let us bid God-speed to the theatre!—then let us thank God for an instrumentality at once so attractive and

salutary, and let us pray that he would incline the hearts of the people to flock to the theatre, and send his good angels down to hover over the scene, and help the actors in their acting and the people to drink deep of the influences that flow from their acting. But if this influence damages the character, hinders virtue and helps to vice, then, whoever will hear or forbear, it is our duty to warn all who will hear to flee the way to the pit.

This is a question that mightily concerns fathers and mothers, uppermost in whose hearts is the desire that their children acquire and maintain a high moral character, unstained by polluting thought, undamaged by impure association; a word from whom will be enough to send their sons and daughters to the theatre, and against whose resolute prohibition comparatively few of our youth would ever come within the reach of its fascinations.

It is a question of immense importance to the nation. For as sure as fate is the doom of our republic, freighted with so precious a cargo for mankind, when once the public morality has reached a certain pitch of degradation. And how large a margin is left us to go upon in this direction is seen in certain facts that stare us in the face and make us tremble—in the fact that of five hundred and thirty millions of dollars, due the national coffers during the year 1867 from the

internal revenue, *one half* was lost through the robbery of corrupt officials, and through collusion between them and those from whom this money was due—in the fact that bribery so largely prevails in our nominating conventions and in our legislative halls, and in the fact that almost every morning's newspaper blushes and bleeds and weeps with tales of fraud and outrage, violence, robbery, murder and suicide! If, therefore, the theatre be an ally of virtue, let us build one at every street corner; but if of vice, let its doors be shut, bolted and barred for ever!

But there are higher interests at stake than even those of the nation—those of personal religion and salvation. What are nations but bubbles on the stream of time, ever forming, ever bursting? And as to ourselves as citizens, who, a century hence, will know or care that we ever existed? But a century hence, you and I and our children will know that we lived and died in a world wet with the tears, stained with the blood of the Son of God, and we and they shall then be treading either the crystal pavements of heaven or the burning sands of woe! If then the theatre help to heaven why then, in God's good name, let heaven help the the theatre! But if it flings souls to perdition, let all good people join in flinging it to annihilation.

1. To help us in determining the character and influence of the theatre, let us *first* interrogate *the*

instincts of the pious heart. I ask them of art, science, literature, commerce and industry, and they promptly respond, "God bless them! they feed the hungry, they clothe the body with raiment, and society with the garniture of civilization." I ask them of the amusements and recreations of acknowledged innocence, and of them they cordially approve. They assure us that

> "Religion never was designed
> To make our pleasures less."

But what say they of the theatre? Tell that devout follower of the Lamb that Peter and Paul used to go to the theatre! Why that look of indignant incredulity? Why does that heart exclaim, Impossible? Suppose that on some communion morning it should be credibly whispered through the house, "Last week he who breaks the bread and pours the wine spent evening after evening at the theatre!" The purest and best of the communion circle would rise and leave the house in disgust! Why is it that the most devout in our churches would just as soon think of jumping off the church steeple, or throwing themselves upon the track before the thundering railway train, as of going to the theatre? Does not all this cast serious suspicion upon the theatre? The deep instincts of piety are not apt to be very far astray in matters of this kind.

2. But is not this a modern prejudice? It certainly is not modern. It is at least eighteen hundred years old.

There was a theatre in Jerusalem in the days of Jesus; think you he ever attended it? Did the apostles ever attend it? Did the early disciples? So far from it, that neither Jesus nor the apostles ever thought of forbidding their attendance upon stage plays. For as an almost invariable rule laws are made to meet known exigencies, to prevent the recurrence of acts that have already inflicted injury. There was no law against murder until after the first actual murder. And no sooner did professors of the faith begin to show themselves in the theatre than the Church opened her mouth in prohibition, and from that time to this her testimony upon this subject has been constant and explicit. The Church very early introduced into her formulas for reception into her fold an express prohibition of attendance at the theatre. At baptism the candidate was called upon to say, "*vanis mundi pompis renuntio*"—"the vain pomp of the world I renounce." Of this formula, Dr. Tayler Lewis writes: "It can be clearly shown that this word *pompæ* was employed with special reference to theatrical shows." And the early Church excluded both actors and spectators from her sacraments. Many of the early synods formally condemned the theatre, and in this they have been followed by nearly all the Churches

of the Reformation—by the Churches of France, Switzerland, Holland, Scotland and America—and that ecclesiastical body is yet to be named that has spoken of it in other terms than those of reprobation.

In the second century Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch, wrote: "Neither dare we presume upon the liberty of your shows, lest our senses be tinctured with indecency and profaneness."

Tertullian wrote: "We have nothing to do with the lewdness of the playhouse." St. Cyprian wrote: "What business has a Christian at such places as these?" St. Augustine calls theatres "cages of uncleanness and public schools of debauchery." Archbishop Tillotson calls the theatre "the devil's chapel, a nursery of licentiousness and vice." And one of the standards of doctrine accepted by a vast body of Christians to-day classes "stage plays" among the prohibitions of the seventh commandment.

Such has been the extent and force of this "prejudice" in the Church for eighteen hundred years.

By "the Church," of course we mean the great body of her clergy and laity of acknowledged piety. We are not unaware that the Romish Church attempted, for a while, to make use of dramatic representations of sacred things, and history attests what work she made of it. Some of the

Reformers even, were not without hopes that the drama might be employed for good. And the actress, Mrs. Mowatt, assures us that some two hundred English clergymen have written for the stage. But when we recall the condition of that Church under the domination of the state, and remember that Dean Swift was one of her clergymen, and that the infidel Colenso now wears the mitre as a bishop in that Church, we need not wonder at anything some of her ministry may do or say. But as to the general tenor of church-teaching upon this subject, there is not room for honest difference of opinion among those competent to form a judgment.

Now, if there is any truth in religion, the Holy Spirit abides in his Church to shape and guide her moral judgments; and the fact that these judgments have so constantly and emphatically condemned the theatre is sufficient to deepen suspicion in all pious minds that on this subject the patrons of the theatre are on one side and God on the other.

3. In her condemnation of the theatre the Church has been joined by men of almost every class. William Wilberforce writes that thence "decorum, modesty and regularity retire," while thither "riot and lewdness are invited." There "motions and gestures are often applauded which would not be tolerated in private company." Dr. Channing writes that the theatre "has nourished

all intemperance and vice. It is an accumulation of immoral influences. Exhibitions of dancing are given, fit only for brothels." All this and much more he says, while yet hesitating to say, as many others do, with all the assurance of the profoundest conviction, that "the amusement is radically, essentially evil." The Rev. Dr. Bellows, of the same religious persuasion as Dr. Channing, and one of the very few clerical apologists for the theatre, writes: "From all I have read or learned by direct observation and inquiry, I believe that the ordinary verdict of serious minds and of the pulpit *has many painful* elements of truth in it."

Lord Kames writes of English comedy that in the play-house the young man loses his disgust of vice, and "contempt of religion and a declared war upon the purity of the female sex are converted from being infamous vices into fashionable virtues." The brilliant infidel Rousseau strenuously resisted the opening of a theatre in Geneva, on the express ground of its hostility to virtue, while another shrewd infidel strenuously advocated the theatre, on the express ground that it was "the most efficacious expedient for relaxing among any people that preciseness and austerity of morals which, under the name of holiness, it is the business of Scripture to inculcate."

The apostate Julian, seeking to restore fallen paganism, forbade his friends to attend the theatre,

because the Galileans had gained their ascendancy by avoiding such causes of corruption and the profligacy to which they lead.

An invalid play-actor said to a clergyman: "I have been acting Falstaff till I thought I should have died, and had I died, it would have been in the service of the devil. As soon as I recover I shall be King Richard. This play has some striking and moral things in it. But after that, I shall come in with my farce—'A Dish of All Sorts'—and knock all in the head. Fine reformers we!"

After the delivery of the substance of this tract as an address in Concert Hall, Philadelphia, a gentleman said to me, "That is pretty strong, but not nearly strong enough, as I can testify; for I have been an actor myself."

It has been stated over and over again in the public prints of England and America, that the celebrated actor, W. C. Macready, made it an invariable rule that "none of his children should either go to the theatre or have any visiting connections with actors or actresses."

This indeed has been sneered at as a "mere newspaper story." But the stigma it stamps upon the theatre, and the many and powerful motives that prompt to its denial, and the facility with which this denial might be secured by a line to Mr. Macready, and withal the fact that it still stands uncontradicted upon the record, will go very far to-

ward impressing the public mind with the conviction of its truthfulness.

Of the son of one who was for more than a score of years manager of one of the New York theatres, and who maintained through life a high respectability, a brother clergyman writes me: "I was very intimate with him. He was often at my father's house, and I as often at his. And I remember well the surprise with which I received from him the announcement that he was not allowed to go to the theatre, or perhaps it was that he had not been allowed to go. At all events, the impression made upon my mind was, that his father did not *consider the theatre a fit place for his children.*" Has the clergyman ever yet been found who objected to the church, as a place unfit for his children, or who forbade his children to "have any visiting connections" with the families of clergymen?

Hannah More, the friend of Garrick, and in her earlier days a writer for and patron of the theatre, writes, as the judgment forced upon her by her own observation—for she says she had read none of the writings against the stage—that "the fruits of the Spirit and the fruits of the stage perhaps exhibit as pointed a contrast as the human imagination can conceive."

Add now the weight of these various testimonies to the judgment of the Church and the bearing of the deepest instincts of the pious heart, and are

they not enough to deepen suspicion into full conviction that there is something in the theatre radically antagonistic to the interests of virtue and religion?

4. And should it not add to the depth and force of this conviction to note the visible influence of a theatre upon the neighbourhood around it?

We have seen with our own eyes a once quiet and orderly portion of a great city thoroughfare so changed in character by the opening of a theatre there as to make it anything but pleasant, if not often actually unsafe, for a woman to pass the spot after nightfall without a protector. With what singular constancy the gin-palace, the gambling hell and the house of the lost woman make their appearance in its vicinity! How comes it that these means and appliances of dissipation and vice so constantly spring up in the place whither theatre-goers resort? Why do these breathing-holes of perdition open their devouring mouths around the theatre as naturally as ashes gather about the crater of a volcano? What mean these striking affinities? Dr. Bellows admits that "the immorality and recklessness of society, its folly and vice, have clustered around the theatre." Now why is this, if not because "birds of a feather flock together?" As long as the theatre attracts such a companionship, no sophistries of special pleading will persuade thinking minds that

the source of attraction is other than the sympathy that naturally springs up between similarities of taste and character.

5. Upon another point we must speak with plainness, though anxious to speak with moderation and truth; and that is—*the character of a large proportion of those most constant in their attendance at the theatre.*

Let us not be understood as intimating that none of the pure, the refined, and even of the church-membership are found within its walls; but *let* us be understood, not as *intimating*, but as affirming without all fear of contradiction, that the vilest characters in the community, male and female, and that in *large* numbers, go to the theatre as regularly as the pitying stars come out to weep over and beckon them to heaven! Poor, wretched, fallen woman, gone down from her glory into the depths of a bottomless shame, and gone *thither* to drag others down to ruin, or *dragged* down by dissolute, heartless man—gone thither as victor-victim to revenge her cruel wrongs on the sex to which she owes her damnation!

Sir Walter Scott wrote in his day: "The best part of the house is openly and avowedly set off for their reception, and no part open to the public is free from their intrusion, or at least from the disgusting improprieties to which their neighbourhood gives rise. Unless in case of strong attrac-

tion upon the stage, prostitutes and their admirers usually form a *principal* part of the audience. The most refined theatres in the world are destined to company so scandalous that persons not very nice in their taste of society must yet exclaim against the abuse."

"A committee, appointed to inquire into this matter with reference to one of the royal theatres in London, reported that if these people were excluded the theatre could not be supported!" A similar committee, appointed in Boston to report with reference to the old Tremont Theatre, said that "a part of the house was frequented by men of notoriously bad character, and that there had been no time within memory when it was not so 'in every theatre in Boston!'" The manager of the Park Theatre, in New York, a few years ago attempted a reform in this matter, and he was obliged to inform the public in a card that the attempt was a failure!

Now, should it be said that here or there in one or two isolated instances a somewhat better state of things had been brought about, yet there stands the bald, obtrusive fact that to the theatre instinctively flock, as children to their home, as sheep to their pasture-ground, all that is vile and disreputable in society! What strange attraction has the theatre for these people? How comes it to pass that it is the only public place where they love

to congregate? Dr. Bellows "supposes" them to be attracted by "love of pleasure, spectacle, society, talent, beauty, light, architecture."

Without controversy, it is the expectation of *pleasure* that draws them thither. But what is pleasure if not the harmony that flows from tastes and character in contact with their appropriate objects? And is "architecture" one of the objects in which the most disgusting passions delight? Why, then, do they not seek it in our churches? Is "light" one of these objects? We had thought it was darkness. The wise man evidently thought so too. He says that these persons go to meet each other "in the twilight, in the evening, in the black and dark night." Is it "talent?" These murderers of mind and intellect in themselves delight in the talent of others! No, no; it is "spectacle," and often what a spectacle! It is beauty, and what sort of beauty? It is society congenial to their tastes and character. By the confession, then, of its friend, the theatre is the place where the courtesan and her paramour find what gratifies their taste and gives them pleasure. Alas, then, for the theatre!

6. Once more. The ages and communities *most reckless* and *abandoned* in morals have always been those most *passionately addicted* to the theatre.

Rollin, in his history of the Greeks, heads one of his sections, "Fondness for theatrical representations one of the principal causes of the decline, degeneracy and corruption of the Athenian State." And think you he travelled beyond the record when such facts as this stared him in the face?—"During the representation of a piece at Athens, the astounding news came of the defeat of the Greeks before Syracuse; and although the theatre was filled with the relatives of the fallen, scarce a spectator there that was not represented on the field by some bleeding or slain friend, the audience simply muffled their faces and then commanded the play to go on!"

What was the character of the people who revelled in the plays of Aristophanes? Rollin writes that "the gross obscenities with which those plays abound only show to what a pitch of degradation the morals of people and play-writer had come."

Of the French Revolution the celebrated Edmund Burke writes: "While courts of justice were thrust out by Jacobin tribunals, and silent churches were only funereal monuments of departed religion"—when Paris "was like a den of outlaws—a lewd tavern for revel and debaucheries"—there were in that city "no fewer than *twenty-eight* theatres crowded every night!" From debauchery, blasphemy and butchery in the day-time to the theatre at night—from the theatre at night back to butchery, blasphemy and debauchery in the day-time! What is

there in the theatre that can adapt itself to tastes and passions so beastly? Are schools of virtue, are our churches so facile, plastic and pliant?

What was the moral aspect of society under the sway of Cromwell, from his palace downward to his armies? What of those armies, even—those armies that never found a foe worthy of their steel—"that moved to victory," writes Macaulay, "with the precision of machines, while burning with the wildest fanaticism of Crusaders—often surrounded by difficulties, sometimes contending against threefold odds, and yet not only never failed to conquer, but never failed to destroy whatever opposed them? Turenne was startled by the shout of stern exultation with which his English allies advanced to the combat, and expressed the delight of a true soldier when he learned that it was ever the fashion of Cromwell's pikemen to rejoice greatly when they beheld the enemy." Now what was the moral character of these people? "That which distinguished the army of Cromwell," continues the historian, "from other armies was the austere morality and fear of God which pervaded all ranks. No oath was heard, no drunkenness or gambling was seen—the property of the peaceful and the honour of woman were held sacred." And this people *abolished* the theatre!

Men may sneer, if they will, at the straight-haired, round-head fanatics—may call them sour-faced hypocrites and what not—but even their foes will not deny that they professed and strove to carry out high, lofty, moral aims.

Macaulay says: "They determined not only to protect religion and public morals from insult, but to *make* the people truly devout. It was solemnly resolved by Parliament that no person should be employed but such as the House shall be satisfied of his real godliness. The pious assembly had the Bible on its table for reference. The Puritan spoke with disdain of a low standard of popular morality; his life was regulated by a far more rigid code; his virtue was sustained by motives unknown to men of the world." *And this people abolished the theatre!* Perhaps they abolished other and harmless and useful things, but one thing they saw by intuition, and that was that their scheme of morality could not co-exist with the theatre. Their extravagances let him defend who will, but it will be long before thoughtful Christians will place the abolition of the play-house among them.

Now what was the aspect of public morality after the death of Cromwell and the restoration of the Stuarts? Then, writes Baptist Noel, came "those days never to be recalled without a blush—days of servitude without loyalty, of sensuality without love, of dwarfish talents and gigantic vices—the caresses of harlots and the jests of buffoons regulating the measures of a government

that had just ability enough to deceive, and just religion enough to persecute."

The state of things at court may be seen in the following, from the pen of a devoted loyalist of the time: "I can never forget the inexpressible luxury and profaneness, gaming and all dissoluteness, and, as it were, total forgetfulness of God, *it being Sunday*, which this day se'enight I was witness of. The king sitting and toying with his concubines, Portsmouth, Cleveland and Mazarine. A French boy singing love-songs in that glorious gallery, while about seventy of the great courtiers and other dissolute persons were at basset round a large table, a bank of at least £2000 in gold before them." *It being Sunday!* If thus with the shepherd, how with the sheep? Let Macaulay answer. He says that this was "a period of wild and desperate dissoluteness," felt in some degree in "remote manor-houses and hamlets, but in London the outbreak of debauchery was appalling." He says that decorum was laughed at. "The fashionable circles and the comic poets took up the notion that it might well be doubted whether there was such a thing as virtue in the world."

Need we stop to say that the doors of the theatre were thrown wide open by such a people—that this age was a very millennium of play-actors and play-goers? And need we ask what was the character of the drama at such a time, when every interest of man demanded protest and denunciation against abounding dissoluteness? Alas! the drama has always "become conformed to the character of its patrons." "It was," writes Macaulay, "in the most emphatic sense of the words, earthly, sensual devilish. Belial with the iron eye and cruel sneer of Mephistopheles—ladies like very profligate, unfeeling men, and men too bad for any place but Pandemonium or Norfolk Island—foreheads of bronze, hearts like the nether millstone, tongues set on fire of hell."

Is American society as pure to-day, reaping its fearful harvestage of imported and indigenous immorality, with its millions annually expended on theatrical shows, as in those earlier days when the American Congress by formal resolution favoured the printing and circulation of the Holy Scriptures, and by formal resolution denounced the theatre as inimical to virtue and patriotism?

Can we then longer withhold the verdict that the theatre is always and everywhere a living, blighting curse upon society, upon purity and piety and the well-being of man?

This being so, we may well inquire where lies the secret of its mischievous influence? Where is the seat of the leprosy? For a constant result must issue from a constant cause, and the cause of theatrical immoralities lies in the body, flesh and bones of the theatre—in the very heart of its vi-

tality. It is in its own essential nature an immorality.

What is its highest even *professed* aim? The favourite answer is, "To hold the mirror up to nature." In other words, to place human nature as it displays itself in common life—"the very age and body of the time," in its actual "form and pressure"—alive upon the stage, for the gratification of a pleasure-seeking audience, for their mere amusement, not *recreation*—to furnish that audience with so many fresh pleasurable sensations. For we now hear little of the dramatic cant, once so fashionable, about the theatre as "a school of virtue." Dr. Bellows well says: "If the satisfaction and pleasure of seeing these plays depended upon their moral influence, or if their performance could be justified only by their direct usefulness to morals, I fear I should lose my case with the serious class." No, its ostensible aim is to epitomize society as it lives around us and reports its doings in our newspapers, police gazettes and courts of justice, and set it upon the stage, speaking and acting out its inner self in the presence of a promiscuous assembly of men, women and children. But what is actual human society? Is it not an admixture of all that is vile and abominable, with here and there a salt-grain of excellence? Take the *dramatis personæ* of even Shakspeare, and tell us what vile character is not found among them—

the buffoon, the drunkard, the profane swearer, the profligate, the robber, the lurking assassin, the courtesan and her paramour—all the children of recklessness and sensuality. Now say if it be possible, with whatever aim in view, to group these characters upon the stage, to speak and act out what is in them, without inevitable moral damage to both spectator and actor? *It is not possible!* But when that aim is, as it always is, simply to amuse—when the characters and acts of men and women on their way to the judgment-seat of Christ, whose every sin is riveting chains of woe upon their souls, are paraded upon the stage, simply to help others to while away an hour in luxurious excitement—it is little else than sacrilege! Is human nature, stamped with God's bright image, to be turned into a plaything? Are man's follies and foibles and vices, that make God frown and angels weep, and that sting and stain the soul for ever, proper food for thoughtless mirth and diversion? God forbid! How can actors ever come to look seriously on sins which are with them a constant object of merry mimicry, or spectators upon vices which by long practice they come to associate with joyous pastime? Vices, at first disgusting, now grown familiar, are looked on not only without aversion, but with a kindly, grateful feeling as the donors of many a merry hour. We love what gives us pleasure. The looking upon sin in a merry mood is a

process of self-vitiation; much more so the acting of sin in fun and frolic. Both are an insult to human nature and an insult to God. Therefore we say that if the highest professed aim of the theatre were realized, which it never is, it must still work serious damage to all that is good in our nature.

But in fact the stage never even attempts to realize its highest professed aim. The one actual aim of the stage is, as everybody knows, to make money. To this end it is under compulsion to present only such scenes in the main as shall feed and gratify the tastes of the *majority* of those who most constantly fill the seats before it. Now will any pretend that this majority is, or ever has been, composed of those most noted for high, pure morality? Or will any one venture to deny that a large and essential portion of that audience is made up of the dregs of society? But the bulk of this audience *must* be gratified. Before it our poor human nature, with its frailties and vices, must be exhibited, not as a diseased patient to the physician, not as invoking the remedial medicaments of the Son of God, not as exposed to the solemnities of the judgment and the retributions of eternity, but in such guise as to make *that* audience merry over them, as to elicit plaudits from box, pit and gallery, and secure another harvest of coin from the returning audience? And therefore

again, and that with new emphasis, we say that the theatre is a moral blight and curse!

And herein lies one secret of its constant and inevitable deterioration. As under the draw of gravitation, the stage descends from bad to worse. For it must gratify those spectators, and in gratifying, it still further corrupts them, and then those tastes it has vitiated drag it down to a lower level.

Nothing is more common with the enlightened and perplexed patrons of the stage than complaints of its degradation. A critic in a recent number of the New York *Evening Post* says: "That the drama *is* degraded is admitted in advance. The *France* did not exaggerate very much when it said that *tableaux vivants* have replaced paintings of manners; 'tights' suffice where the public used to expect fine thoughts and verses." Yes, that the drama *is* degraded is admitted, and that it always has been cannot be denied, and that it always will be is as certain as that a vulture will always remain a vulture—as that a thing must always be itself.

"Never," writes Dr. Lewis, "never—we think we may safely say it—has any true friend of religion and morality been found upholding the theatre as it actually *is* or *was* at any particular period. Their warmest defence is ever coupled with the admission that, as at present managed, it needs some decided reform to make it in all respects what it ought to be."

The reason is obvious. What is essentially immoral, always, by a law of nature, goes from bad to worse. And as Dr. Bellows well says, "The vices of the theatre have uniformly been those of the time. Profanity and coarseness from the pit and boxes have required profanity and coarseness from the stage, while vulgarity and ignorance have demanded rant and fustian." Thus we have a solution of the arduous problem of a perpetual motion. First, the stage makes a company of spectators merry over the follies and vices of society. Then the spectators, degraded in the process, drag the stage down to their new level, and thus sin feeds itself, the stage the audience and the audience the stage, until at length, in every country but our own, legislation or regal authority has been compelled to interpose either to arrest or abolish the the theatre. Then follows a spasmodic effort at reform, it to be soon followed by the old chronic descent from bad to worse.

Therefore among all hopeless things the most hopeless is a permanent elevation of the drama. If the reform is ever to come, is it not almost time for its advent? For thousands of years it has been in the world. Almost as early as men found out how to convert God's good fruits into a means of intoxication, they found out how to feed their appetite for dramatic exhibitions. Why is the reform so long delayed? Why, after all these centuries is the theatre as bad to-day as it ever has been? Reform the stage! Why, if its highest, ostensible aim were realized, it would still be a curse; and the *actual* stage finds no virtuous defenders in any age.

The process and result of a reform in the theatre would be like the result and process in reforming intoxicating drink by removing the intoxicating quality—nobody would drink it.

And what is the stage to-day?

1. In the first place, it is outrageously profane. This indeed is no new thing, for it has always been so. Profanations of the name of Almighty God are and always have been a staple article in trade with play-writers and play-actors. The pages of Shakespeare abound with them. A recipe for a modern play given in a number of the New York *Round Table* demands, among other morsels, "three hundred oaths and sixty-four pages of blasphemy." Can it be otherwise than fearfully demoralizing to utter and listen to blasphemy as an amusement?

2. Then the stage is notorious for shameless indecency in the spectacles to which it invites our young men and maidens. In the Paris correspondence of the New York *Nation* of this winter we read, "The theatres of the capital are all complaining of the scantiness of their audiences. Whether this indifference of the public be due to the fact

that everybody is busy shopping, or *to the recent intervention of the police, to which we owe a noticeable addition to the quantity and length of the draperies of the ballet-dancers*, it is difficult to say." Yes, to-day, even in Paris, the paradise of voluptuousness, the police are compelled to interpose between shameless women and the public they debauch with their indecencies! A recent French critic complains that "the modern theatre *makes a parade of sensuality*." On this a writer in the New York *Evening Post* remarks, "The evil of which French critics and moralists complain *is rapidly spreading through our cities*." Rapidly spreading! That this is a most delicate understatement of the actual truth is seen in the following extract from an editorial article in the New York *Observer* of Nov., 1867:

"One of the leading theatrical critics of London has recently made a tour in America, and published a letter in a London paper on dramatic entertainments in this country. He says that while many here will not cross the threshold of a theatre, those who have once taken the step will *welcome and enjoy a degree of licentiousness that would not be tolerated* by the audience of an English theatre. The object of this letter was useful information for foreigners who desire to make America a field for their dramatic powers. If by years of practice before an English audience any woman has acquired the art of repeating shameless allusions in a delightful manner, and now is equal to something still more highly seasoned with unblushing vileness, she is assured by this London critic that she will find a cultivated field for her disgraceful accomplishments in the refined metropolis of the Western World."

Time was in American society when, according to the *Round Table* to have proposed to any sane American the atrocity of being a play-actor would have cost the proposer a severe lecture, if not a sound drubbing; but now we tolerate on the stage those infamous spectacles, the "Black Crook," the "Golden Branch," and the "White Fawn," in which scores of young women shamelessly expose their persons in lascivious dances to gratify tastes unknown to the breasts of the purely delicate.

3. But even its visible indecencies are not so bad as its shocking theoretic immoralities.

"Take the play"—we condense an extract from the Rev. F. H. Newhall—"which has drawn vast audiences in all the principal theatres of our land. 'Camille' is, in plain language, an elegant, fascinating prostitute, making the audience sympathize with her through all her sin—yes, pity, love and adore her. She is made to plunge to the very depths of infamy by reason of the purity and sincerity of her devotion to one who is worthy of her affection — trailing her soul through the foulest

corruption a woman can know," and then at last "the happy spirit exhales to heaven!"

"The hero of 'Norma,' is a shameless adulterer, the heroine of 'La Favorita' is a wretched courtesan. 'Don Giovanni' is a violation of the Seventh Commandment set to music." And many others might be named which are naught but tales of infamy from beginning to end. It is enough to make the heart sick to think of the present condition and future prospects of a society in which such things are not only tolerated but welcomed and applauded, and that too by those who a few years ago would have hissed them out of the land.

And now we beg the thoughtful friend of virtue to consider what *must* be the effect of stage scenes upon both actor and spectator.

To personate a character with any hope of success requires diligent, careful and protracted study. The performer retires to his closet, book in hand, and there peruses those pages, drinking in their every thought, plying his soul with those thoughts, until they become a part of his being. He does all that in him lies for the time actually to *be* the character he is to personate. So far does this identification of self with the assumed character sometimes go, that in numerous recorded instances the self has been actually lost in the character, and the crazed actor has for years fancied himself actually to be in life what for so long he had studied

to become upon the stage. That character may be Falstaff, or Iago, or Caliban, or what not; and now tell us what must be the result upon the moral nature of a man of this prolonged, studious, passionate effort to think, feel and act like a devil?

Then think of those poor, wretched women, hardening themselves to shameless self-exposure to the gaze of thousands, spending long years of their lives in bathing, saturating their souls with the thoughts and emotions of those filthy characters that form the chief charm of many of those plays! Let any one recall his own experiences, if unfortunately he has any to recall. Did any son of Belial ever thrust before your eyes an indecent picture? And have you ever been able to forget it? Is there any moral caustic in the world that can burn it out of your recollection? None! You are stained therewith to your dying day! And the indictment we table against the stage is, that it *compels* actors and actresses to people their minds with polluting imagery, to defile them with vile emotions, that feed and intensify the depravities of the heart and drag them inevitably down to degradation of soul!

And what, in fact, is and always has been the actual prevailing character of actors, male and female? Not only has it been disreputable—for society *cannot respect* him or her who squanders life for its *amusement*—but it has been also immo-

ral, licentious. We say the *prevailing* character, for we may not deny that there have been notable exceptions—just about enough to *prove* the rule. "The fact," writes Dr. Lewis, "that in a very few cases, like those of Garrick and Mrs. Siddons, they have barely emerged from this load of dishonour only shows how universal and how deep is the opprobrium." Rousseau writes: "I observe that the situation of the actor is one of licentiousness. The men are abandoned to disorder—the woman lead scandalous lives."

And what is the effect of all this upon spectators, and through them upon society? It is terrible to think of! The stage is to-day robbing us of that priceless jewel, womanly modesty! The boast of America, from the beginning until now, has been the delicate modesty and purity of her women. Rob us of this, and alas for the republic! And this the stage is stealing from us every hour! Who that has the weal of society and of the republic at heart can read without deep pain such records as this: "The initial evening" of the Black Crook at Niblo's, New York, "saw the theatre packed—but *with men*, very few having the temerity to take women to an exhibition so very questionable. The second evening the small feminine element was increased, and before the second month had begun, city dames of position and carefully-reared damsels ventured to gaze at the wanton

dances and lewd tableaux, in spite of the blushes that covered them even to their finger-tips!—even the Demon Dance, which no man, however *blasé*, could see for the first time without some sense of shame, was accepted as a thing of course. The first night of its representation, even New York was astonished and mortified, and after a few seconds would have hissed the lascivious exhibition, but for the *claqueurs* carefully posted through the house" (*Northern Monthly*, March, 1868). And what is the result? "Our women" [of the city named], says the same magazine, "have grown harder and ruder, less sensitive and modest. An acquaintance who had been absent for two years asked, What is the matter with my fair acquaintances? I can hardly recognize some of my oldest friends, they are so changed. They remind one of the Paris women, without their tact and grace. They seem broader but less fine and feminine, and the difference between their former and present selves chills and pains me."

This then is the sum of the whole matter—the instincts of deep, pure piety shrink from the exhibitions upon the stage as purity from vileness; the Church for eighteen hundred years has condemned them; in this condemnation she has been joined by writers of almost every class—heathen, men of the world and infidels; actors have refused to allow their children to go to the theatre; the

opening of a theatre almost always, if not always, destroys the moral character of the surrounding neighbourhood; to the theatre the vilest characters in the community, male and female, flock as often as the night shadows fall, and the theatre is the only place of public resort where these lost ones know that they can meet each other; the ages and communities most abandoned in morals have always been most passionately addicted to the theatre; theatrical representations in their best estate are essentially inimical to the morals of both actor and spectator, and in their actual character are a hideous blight upon all purity; the only possible reform of the theatre is its destruction; the stage is outrageously profane, unblushingly indecent and terribly immoral; the character of actors, male and female, is with few exceptions one of licentiousness; and the stage is to-day making desolating inroads upon the pure delicacy of our female society.

The stage is therefore the foe of purity, of piety, of the nation, of man. It is the place where thousands of our precious youth form their first acquaintance with vice, whence they go, step by step along the downward road, breaking the hearts of parents, making virtue weep, piety mourn and constraining the Republic to cry out with Augustus to Varus, "Oh give me back my legions!" Whoever goes to the theatre goes into bad company. Whoever feeds upon the viands served up upon the

stage dines on human souls! Whoever takes a maiden to the theatre takes her where it will be the exception rather than the rule if she do not see things and hear things that will tinge her pure cheek with shame. Whoever pays a half-dollar at the door of the theatre contributes so much to support an institution where men and women destroy their own souls for the amusement of others!

The destruction of the theatre would make demons mad and angels glad, would save the morals of the nation from so fearfully rapid deterioration and would remove a stumbling-block, over which thousands and tens of thousands are precipitating themselves into moral ruin and eternal death!

NOTE—We have been largely indebted in the study of this subject to the elaborate and able Tract on "The Theatre" by the Rev. T. E. Thomas, D. D., of Dayton, Ohio, and also to those of the Rev. F. H. Newhall, D. D. the Rev. R. M. Hatfield, and the Rev. Hiram Mattison, D. D.

THE END.

UNION PRESBYTERIAN SEMINARY
3 2146 00531 6909

OVER 1300 PUBLICATIONS.

JUVENILE,

DEVOTIONAL,

THEOLOGICAL,

TRACTS, CATECHISMS,

Church Blanks, Marriage Certificates,

SABBATH-SCHOOL, CONGREGATIONAL,
AND MINISTERIAL LIBRARIES.

☞ Catalogues furnished on application.

Presbyterian Board of Publication,

No. 821 CHESTNUT STREET,

PHILADELPHIA.